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EDUCATING THE PUBLIC TO A PROPER APPRECIATION OF URBAN STREET RAILWAY PROBLEMS

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Twenty years ago there was hardly a first-class street railway in the United States, judged by present standards, and consequently there were few, if any, of the many problems which face the average street railway company operating to-day. As street railways have developed, their problems have multiplied rapidly, which is what is to be expected when one considers that there is probably no business that comes into closer contact with so many persons in a community as these common carriers on our streets and highways.

We expect the street railway, as a matter of course, to provide us dependable service under all conditions of weather and under all stress of circumstances. We forget how well these carriers in all our cities are performing their service, never thinking how few times each of us has been seriously delayed on account of burn-outs of cables or power stations, snowbound tracks or breakdowns in wires or cars. We place absolute confidence in the street car, depending upon its daily punctuality and reliability to enable us to keep important business and social engagements.

But in spite of this responsibility on the part of the company to the public, and their dependence upon the company, there has grown up from year to year many important problems which, instead of being worked out in a spirit of mutual forbearance and helpfulness, have furnished the basis for misunderstanding and friction. The company's right to use the streets, the company's taxes, the extension or building of lines, the character of cars used, the system of heating and ventilation, the speed of cars, the system of transfers and transfer privileges, the question of fares and the frequency of service, are only a few of the many problems that stand unsolved to-day between the average operating company and the public it serves.

Admitting that there are many serious differences existing be-

tween the public and its servants, what should be the true relation between the two and what is the most sensible way to go about establishing such a relation? This seems to me to be the kernel of the question assigned to me for brief discussion.

I should say that the ideal relation should be one of mutual confidence in and respect for each other. Let the company properly appreciate that the public's wants should be given fair and courteous hearing and prompt decision. Let the public give the company the same decent consideration in all matters that one individual grants to another. First, let there be a basis of good faith established between the two and, after each understands the other's viewpoint better, perhaps the problems will solve themselves, or be settled by compromise for the mutual good of both.

Education of the public by the corporation of the latter's viewpoint seems to me to be a sensible remedy. Let the public know the ins and outs of your business, at least as regards any problem in which its rights are concerned, and perhaps the public will take a broader and fairer view of matters of which at present it may be ignorant.

Education by Publicity.—Everybody to-day believes in the immeasurable value of publicity in clearing up misunderstandings. At the present time almost every corporation, great or small, has its publicity department, organized not to give false or colored facts, but for the purpose of presenting its true position to its patrons. The old days when corporations preserved owl-like stillness on every subject have gone. To-day people want to know why. The public says to us in effect, let us know what you want and why you want it, and if you can convince us that you are right we will help you. There is no reason why any company should hesitate to respond fully to such an invitation and tell exactly what it wants and needs and what it will give in return, discussing the whole matter in an open, frank way.

I believe that the daily and weekly newspapers, the display cards in the company's own cars, and the company's folders and publications, offer the most effective mediums for conducting such a campaign of education. I would rather rely upon an announcement printed in the columns of a good, clean newspaper which is carried into the homes of its readers than upon any other means of directly educating the mass of the people. The value of such publicity can

scarcely be estimated or appreciated. I believe that such announcements, if prepared with the utmost care as to statements and attractiveness, can do more to develop a fine feeling of confidence between the company and its patrons than any other form of appeal. Of course, this broad statement is based upon the promise that the announcement rings true and fair and that the company's word stands for something when it makes promises in print.

Companies everywhere are following a plan of newspaper advertising when problems arise which require discussion with the public. I know of one company which tells its side of the case every time an important matter comes up. One day it discusses the question of taxation; another day fares; another day it argues out the policy of building new lines or extending old ones, of putting on more cars, of adopting new features in equipment, or of warning parents against accident features. In brief, it takes the public into its confidence, and puts each case squarely up to the patrons for a fair answer. The company's general manager tells me there has been developed a wonderfully fine feeling on the part of patrons since this newspaper educational campaign was begun some three years ago.

Companies have opportunity to supplement their newspaper campaign by inserting display cards in their own cars and announcements in their folders, time tables and other periodical literature. These measures need involve no great cost, and so the hue and cry of great expense to conduct a publicity campaign need not frighten the ever-watchful manager. A campaign of education, no matter how well conducted, however, has its discouraging features. There are roving the earth to-day many ultra "progressive" politicians who boast of their independence to the point that they are positively vicious when anything comes up for public consideration that has to do with any corporation. "Don't believe a word they say, it's not so," is the clarion cry they give out when any corporation raises its voice to defend itself. Then it sometimes happens that the few or the many, as the case may be, do not give the corporation a chance to be heard. Thus another chasm is thrown between the company and its patrons. The corporation asks, "What's the use?", and in the future treats the public as an enemy. Every corporation official devoutly hopes that Fate, with a large, up-holstered club of Titanic dimensions, will some day overtake these

political trouble-makers, or, as the Great African Hunter might say, "These bold, bad, mischievous mixers of black lies." It is hard, also, to convince the wise citizen who boasts in season and out of season that he takes everything a corporation says "with a grain of salt." I would classify this man as belonging to the "You can't fool me family."

A prominent eastern street railway recently spent \$25,000 on a publicity campaign, giving its reasons why it could not continue to develop if it had to reduce its rate of fare, which was ordered by the city council. The company claimed the order was illegal, as it conflicted with the terms of its charter, which had some years to run, and which had been ratified by the state legislature.

The company took one whole page in six daily papers every day for one month, and told a hard-luck, almost "tear-compelling," story, which was the talk of the town. These pages told of the company's early vicissitudes and explained all the hardships and heartbreaks incident to building up a new road in a new land in panicky days when money was needed and hard to get. They told of panics wiping out profits and dividends devoured by disasters; how for twenty years stockholders had gone without a cent earned on their money invested and how the company had faced bankruptcy so many times it had become an old story. Finally, after twenty years of leanness and want, brighter days had come and dividends had been paid at the same rate the savings bank paid! The question was then put up to the public squarely: Do you want a constantly improving service at present rates, or do you want a constantly depreciating service at lower rates? The educational campaign was a series of stories telling real chapters of business, and explained, with diagram and figures, the company's history, its troubles and what was in store for it and for the public in the future if its fare was reduced. Frankly, the company said: "Let us get together and see if we cannot settle this out of court," for the case had gone to the Supreme Court of the United States by this time; "let us see if we cannot arrange matters and make any compromise other than reducing the fare."

The wise politicians seized this chance to suggest loudly in open meetings and in printed pamphlets that the company was not telling the truth, although any of the statements could have been checked and easily verified. They declared that the public "had the

company scared and on the run," and exhorted their hearers not to concede anything to the company or to make any compromise trade, but to "stand pat" upon the original demand. Bad feeling was engendered, and the company, seeing that it was not trusted, withdrew its offer of settlement. The case went to the Supreme Court and in a short time was decided in favor of the company on all counts. The public, having listened to the wise politicians, had lost a good chance to trade.

While it is obviously impossible to arrive at any authoritative conclusion concerning the reasons for the failure of the publicity campaign in the case just cited, yet it is interesting, and perhaps instructive, to examine into the causes which militated against its success.

A most potent factor was doubtless the lack of a feeling of trust and confidence between the company and the public. Rightly or wrongly the public were suspicious of the company, and were not willing to accept its statements at their par value. This feeling of skepticism was carefully cultivated by the politicians, who thought they saw an opportunity to make capital out of the situation.

It must not be inferred, however, that because a particular publicity campaign fails to attain the desired objects, that publicity is a weapon of doubtful value in settling differences between the public and the street railways. It pays a company to tell its troubles frankly to its patrons. The differences of opinion between the public and the company are largely due to the misinformation upon the part of the former.

It is the province of a publicity campaign to destroy false impressions and to give to the thinking portion of the city's population the information necessary to a formation of an intelligent opinion. To those who read with an open and receptive mind, any good newspaper, window card or folder is a valuable agent in assisting the corporation.

The effectiveness of the publicity campaign depends largely upon the public attitude of mind at the time at which it is inaugurated. It can only succeed where a sense of mutual regard and trust has been established. The company's promises and its statements will only be accepted if its reputation for fair dealing with the public has been earned by its previous acts. If the corporation has so lived that it has earned respect for its sincerity and the truthfulness of

its statements there is no reason why a publicity campaign, properly conducted, should fail.

I believe that most public service corporations are doing and trying to do the decent thing by their patrons and their communities, and that in consequence a better understanding is being effected between them. The ethics of corporations, like the ethics of all business concerns, are measurably higher at the present time than they were fifteen or twenty years ago. It is not fair, therefore, to condemn a corporation because of mistakes made in the lifetime of previous generations. A corporation's sincerity should be judged from its acts during recent times. The keynote between the patron and the company in all matters should be mutual co-operation for the benefit of both. "Let us get together" is the twentieth century keynote in the relation between the big and the little, the server and the served, the few and the many. It is the spirit that must prevail in the hearts of both parties before any campaign for education on any subject can be successful.